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FISH OUT OF WATER: A CASE STUDY OF INTERCULTURAL STUDENT COMMUNITIES THROUGH TROMPENAARS' DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

Abstract

The subject of this paper are the instances of intercultural communication within intercultural student communities, based on seven dimensions of culture by Fons Trompenaars. These dimensions are transferred onto intercultural student communities with the aim of determining whether the same principles and values apply as in cross-cultural companies. The research for this paper was conducted through a case study of three student communities in which the author had the opportunity of participating, using qualitative research methods. It is concluded that, within these three student communities, a temporary and unique interculture was created, serving as a common frame of reference and facilitating harmonious communication of its members through the reconciliation of the two dimensions of the cultural spectrum.

Key words: interculture, intercultural communication, seven dimensions of culture, English, multiculturalism, cultural exchange

1. Introduction

The earth is a beehive; we all enter by the same door but live in different cells. Bantu proverb (Confucius in Samovar et al. 2010: 17)

We share this beehive with 7.7 billion other human beings, who belong to thousands of different nations and cultures and speak thousands of different languages. Nation states all over the world have their own "identity, language, systems of nonverbal communication, material culture, history, and *ways of doing things*" (Hall 1976: 2). However, what makes the members of current generations different from the members of all previous generations is the ability for each individual in this beehive to connect with another individual, regardless of their location, language, or culture (Samovar et al. 2010: 1).

This has led to a stupendous increase in the number of intercultural and interethnic exchanges in the last century, up to the point where societies today have

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become a mixture of economic, technological, political, cultural, linguistic and social factors (Samovar et al. 2010: 2). Nowadays, more and more people live "in between cultural identities", and identify themselves with more nationalities, ethnicities, races and religions (Samovar et al. 2010: 168). The notion of connectedness has become key in the process of globalisation and the relationships between people coming from different cultural frames. Multiculturalism and multilingualism have become a part of our world, and it is because we are all so different that we have so much to share with each other. Consequently, communication is becoming increasingly intercultural, as interlocutors are people with different mother tongues, representing different cultures, and communicating in a common language (Kecskes 2004a in Kecskes 2014: 3, 14).

Theoretically, when people of different beliefs, traditions, values and cultures meet, there should be no problems, since they understand their differences and wish to cooperate. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997: 20) acknowledge that any meaningful social interaction "presupposes common ways of processing information among the people interacting". However, each culture has its invisible and unconscious aspects, which the interlocutors must recognise and surpass (Hall 1976: 2).

The aim of this paper is to present the instances of intercultural communication within intercultural student communities, based on seven dimensions of cultures by Fons Trompenaars. Trompenaars' and Hampden-Turner's book, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business,* focuses on different cultural values in the international business context. Through a case study of three intercultural student communities, the author of this paper wanted to transfer the model of seven cultural dimensions onto intercultural student communities in order to investigate whether they could be applied to a different context. While this book proved to be groundbreaking in cross-cultural management, these skills and cross-cultural awareness, to the best of the author's knowledge, have been confined solely to this context. In addition, the author wanted to investigate the principles of cultural reconciliation and the emergence of a third interculture between the participants in three similar cases which were incorporated in this multiple case study. Thus, this paper will begin by establishing a definition of culture applicable to these observed communities, as well as how the emerging common ground among its members leads to the creation of an interculture which, in turn, influences their communication. Having spent a great deal of time in intercultural student communities, the author of this paper believes that, despite the different context, the principles are largely similar. It is in the interest of these students, as much as company managers, to successfully, effectively and harmoniously communicate and cooperate with people in intercultural environments, with whom they presumably spend the majority of their day. The research was conducted through participant observation and immersion into the groups presented in this paper over

the course of student exchange periods. The nature of the research presented here is descriptive in nature, and these instances are qualitatively analysed.

2. Culture and intercultural communication

Culture is one of the notions with "fuzzy boundaries" (Kecskes 2014: 4). According to Raymond Williams (1983: 87), it is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. In his book, he claims that the word culture has three meanings: "general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (1), "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general" (2), "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (3), the third one being most commonly used (Williams 1983: 90). These numerous definitions are neither wrong nor incomplete when it comes to defining a particular aspect of culture. However, as Williams notes, "it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant" (1983: 91). Culture is defined by all of these definitions, depending on the point of view, discipline, context, purpose, place, time period and boundaries.

In the context of this paper, it is important to take into account Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010: 6) definition of culture, as a "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others". This mental software determines ordinary and everyday activities and it does not differentiate between one of the factors that may influence a person. A person's software is influenced by their social environment and that makes it a collective phenomenon, since it is shared with all the members of a community. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997: 13) see it as a "shared system of meanings" and Kecskes (2014: 4) as a system of "shared beliefs, norms, values, customs, behaviours and artifacts" used by members of a group in their contact with the world and each other. It gives people a context in which they meet and think about themselves and others, defines their worldview and expectations, the way they perceive their experiences, and dictates how they will behave and what they will value. It is "the mould in which we are all cast, and it controls our daily lives in many unsuspected ways" (Hall 1959: 52).

Hall (1976: 16–17) claims that there is not a single aspect of human life that is not influenced by culture – personality, expression of emotions, way of thinking and moving, problem solving, personal and group space, economic and government systems. He also believes that culture and communication are two inseparable notions. "[You] 'learn' your culture via communication, while at the same time communication is a reflection of your culture" (Samovar et al. 2010: 22).

People create their native cultural identity through the process of socialisation with other members of their community (Kecskes 2014: 66). Through interaction with

other people, we constantly recreate our cultural identity (Samovar et al. 2010: 164) and in accordance with our identity, we create our communicative behaviour, which differs from one culture to the other. However, when adopting a new culture, a process of restructuring occurs, which results in the awareness of the difference between the two cultures and "the development of an identity that is the reflection of the dual culture" (Kecskes 2014: 67). These interlocutors cannot rely on the same conventions in intercultural, as they do in intracultural communication (Kecskes 2014: 3, 240–241). The shared conventions, common beliefs, knowledge and opinions create common ground, but in the absence of it, interlocutors must co-create it. The way common ground emerges in intercultural communication is through the co-construction of intercultures (Keskes 2014: 151) – "culture[s] constructed in cultural contact" (Koole and ten Thije 1994: 69 in Kecskes 2014: 15), which are not a part of another culture, but they belong to a particular context, particular interlocutors and are "third space" phenomena (Kecskes 2014: 96–97). The interlocutors, on the other hand, are co-dependent, since they co-construct their system of meaning, as a unique combination of individual and societal factors, previous conversations, current context, common cultural experience and common ground, and mutual beliefs and expectations (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 20). This paper will present the instances of intercultural communication among members of different cultures, who still carry within themselves their own cultural models, complemented by those reflective of their interculture.

3. Fish out of water: A case study of intercultural student communities

A fish only discovers its need for water when it is no longer in it. Our own culture is like water to a fish. It sustains us. We live and breathe through it. What one culture may regard as essential, a certain level of material wealth for example, may not be so vital to other cultures. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 20)

In their book *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, which is the basis of this paper, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner tackle cultural differences and their influence on business and management models in international companies. They claim (1997: 3–4) that in today's society, influenced by globalisation, the process of internationalisation will lead to the creation of a common culture worldwide, but that it requires the knowledge of cultural patterns, and that it cannot be assumed that a rule in one culture is the rule in another culture. The authors deal with cultural differences in relation to other people and their influence on international organisations and behaviour, in order to identify the steps towards the reconciliation of cultural differences.

Relying on Kluckhorn and Strodtbeck's claim that "mankind is confronted with universally shared problems emerging from relationships with fellow beings, time, activities and nature" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 27), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner believe that each culture differs from others based on the solutions to those problems. These solutions depend on the cultural background of the group and the meanings they ascribe to life, other people, time and nature. Based on them, seven dimensions of culture can be identified:

1. Universalism versus particularism
2. Individualism versus communitarianism
3. Neutral versus emotional
4. Specific versus diffuse
5. Achievement versus ascription
6. Sequential versus synchronic
7. Internal versus external control
(Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 8–10)

Within these seven dimensions, the authors do not perceive cultures as static points on a dual axis map, but rather as a circle with preferred arcs joined together. It is their hypothesis that cultures that seek to integrate and reconcile values are more successful. Trompenaars' dimensions are universal for all human beings, what differs is their solution to these dilemmas.

The environment which is the focus of this paper is not an international company, but intercultural student communities. However, it is based on similar principles. Students in these communities spend the majority of the day together and the need for understanding is necessary in order to ensure harmonious co-existence. In the collision of several different cultures, the members must understand the principles, beliefs, values and ways of thinking in their own culture. In order to communicate successfully, the differences between the respective native cultures of the interlocutors and the interculture they co-created must be reconciled. Awareness of cultural differences, respect and reconciliation leads to transcultural competence (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 195).

3.1 Universalism versus particularism

This cultural dimension is derived from the relationship to people. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997: 8) believe that universalism entails the application of certain principles and cultural rules in all cases, whereas particularism entails the specifics of the situation and interpersonal relationships. Thus, less attention is paid to abstract rules.

During the student exchange programme, a student from Montenegro and a student from Mexico had a disagreement regarding their view of this dichotomy. According to the set rules at the University in Austria, students are allowed to stay in the library after 7 pm only if their access is extended electronically through their student identity card. The student from Montenegro has not asked for the extension and therefore, she could not stay in the library. She asks the student from Mexico to lend her his identity card in order to enter the library. But he refuses to help her, saying that what she intends to do is against the rules, illegal even. Their national cultures are particularistic, according to Trompenaars, which the student from Montenegro considers to also be a part of their common ground and he, as her friend, would be expected to "bend the rules" and help her out. The fact that they are currently in a universalist country and culture is a part of their mutual common knowledge. However, the student from Montenegro is aware that her request is against the rules, but she is hoping that her friend would be willing to make an exception and that the characteristics of his national culture would override the characteristics of the culture which constitutes their immediate context. What she also relies on was mentioned before this situation by the student from Mexico. Namely, he said that the possession of a driver's licence was not necessary in Mexico in order to drive, and that he, in fact, does drive despite not having it, which supports Trompenaars' claim that countries in Latin America are usually particularistic. Had this situation taken place in Mexico, he probably would have lent her his student identity card without any objections. Just like she considers their mutual common ground to be their national culture standpoint in regard to this dichotomy, he sees their immediate culture as their common ground. He is aware that they are in a universalist country and that causes the dilemma. On the one hand, he feels he should abide by the rules of this particularistic country, but on the other hand, there is the obligation towards the person who is his friend and who he does not want to hurt. Eventually, he decides to lend her his identity card, which means that his national culture prevails. Trompenaars also believes that these two dichotomies can exist in one person (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 43). He chooses to help his friend in order to maintain good interpersonal relationships, aware that there would probably be no repercussions and thus reconciling these two dichotomies.

3.2 Individualism versus communitarianism

This dimension is also derived from the relationship to people. It concerns the relationship between a group and an individual, that is, whether people consider themselves as individuals or as a part of a group, and whether it is more important to focus on individuals in order for them to contribute to the community or to focus on the community. Individualism is described as "a prime orientation to the self",

while communitarianism is described as "a prime orientation to common goals and objectives" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 50).

During the student exchange programme, in one of such instances, a student from Italy arranged for a field trip to the viewpoint which can only be reached by car with his roommate, a student from Turkey. The student from Italy owns a car and the field trip was supposed to take place on a Sunday morning. What they did not take into consideration is that the student from Turkey stays up late because of Ramadan and gets up in the afternoon. In the meantime, two students from Croatia and a student from Serbia joined in on their field trip. The morning of their field trip, the student from Italy found himself in a moral dilemma – whether to honour the group agreement, or to wait for his roommate, with whom he had initially made this arrangement, but who is late, that is, still asleep. There is, undoubtedly, a conflict between his individual desires and the group interest. On the other hand, it is in his interest to honour the group agreement and take his friends to the arranged field trip, being a part of the said group. Trompenaars sees this as a part of the communitarian Catholic spirit in which he was raised. Both individualism and communitarianism can exist in a person and be a part of their judgment (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 50). The student from Italy realises it is more important to fulfill the promise given to three people than to one. He consults other students, who are also members of communitarian cultures. Having subsequently become a part of this arrangement, they do not want to affect his judgment. On the other hand, they know it has to be a unanimous decision, which is why they need the Turkish student's consent. That is why the decision-making process takes longer. The student from Turkey, although still asleep, has the same dilemma. On the one hand, there are his interests of a tired individual, and on the other, the group interests. Nonetheless, by not honouring the agreement, he shows that he is putting his individual, personal interest ahead. Having failed to get up in time, he decides to stay in the dorm and miss out on the field trip. In that way, both of them reconcile their individual interest and group interests, even though they fail to honour the initial agreement. Only this time, not the whole group misses out on the trip.

3.3 Neutral versus emotional

The third dimension, as the previous two, is derived from the relationship to people and concerned with the degree to which emotions are expressed. In neutral cultures, interpersonal relationships should be objective, rational and impartial, whereas in emotional cultures, it is assumed that even business is a human affair and expressing emotions is thus acceptable (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 9).

The following conversation (1) takes place after the student exchange programme, in a group message on one of the mobile apps for messaging. The interlocutors are

two students from Croatia (A and C), a student from Serbia (B) and the subject of the conversation is Diego, a student from Mexico who is visiting her.

> (1) A: Why is Diego frowning in that picture?
> B: Diego says it's the sun.
> C: Yeah… the sun.
> A: Milica is probably being overly sensitive and it bothers Diego.

What was shared in the group message is a photograph of Milica and Diego during a sightseeing tour in Belgrade. It is the middle of July, so the sun is shining, and that is why Diego is frowning. Despite being from a culture which Fons Trompenaars categorises as emotional, Diego is, in fact, rather reserved. He rarely displays his emotions, avoids physical contact and gestures. His frowning does not, however, indicate that he is angry or devoid of feelings. The student from Croatia (C) alludes to their mutual knowledge of Diego's personal traits, based on the time they spent together in the course of the student exchange. She does this by using irony, as an indirect negation of the expressed propositional content (Giora 1995 in Curcó 1999: 258), which also constitutes common ground for the interlocutors, since she often makes use of this rhetorical device. What makes the use of irony possible in this instance is the existence of common ground. The use of irony, which is considered inaccessible for non-native speakers due to the lack of "intersubjective competence as a basis for allusion" (Aston 1993: 243), is made possible in this instance, since there is "shared history" (Aston 1993: 243) which is alluded to. The student from Croatia (A) explains her ironic sentence, alluding to the said common ground, Diego's personal traits. What is necessary for the interpretation of both his and her sentence is the knowledge of their common ground and their meaning system, which make the use of irony and its interpretation possible by all the participants in this conversation. Their mutual familiarity adds to the explanation, as Diego disclosed his attitude towards display of affection, and he is better known to his friends in a growing intimacy.

Kecskes (2014: 151) claims that "[t]he more common ground we share with another person, the less effort and time we need to convey and interpret information". In addition to knowledge of Diego's personal characteristics, which override the characteristics of his national culture, all the participants share common ground in regard to Milica's personal characteristics. Being Serbian, she also belongs to an emotional culture, but, unlike Diego, she expresses her feelings through gesture, facial expressions and smiles. The expression of feelings originates from their interpersonal relationships. The dichotomy introduced by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is the level of visible display of emotions as a difference between cultures (Trompenaars and

Hampden-Turner 1997: 72). In neutral cultures, interpersonal relationships should be objective, impartial and rational, whereas in emotional cultures, it is assumed that all aspects of interpersonal relationships take place between human beings and the display of emotions is acceptable (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 9). Trompenaars also believes that the members of emotional cultures prefer reciprocity from their interlocutors and a direct emotional response (1997: 70), while members of neutral cultures seek a more indirect response (1997: 71).

3.4 Specific versus diffuse

The fourth dimension derives from the relationship to people, as well. It concerns the way people perceive the relationship between their private and professional life. In specific cultures, there is a separation between professional and private life, while in diffuse cultures, members believe there should be a connection between two people, even in their professional life. This dimension relates to the affective versus neutral one, through the degree of involvement of other people in certain aspects of our lives and levels of our personality, the expression of our feelings in front of them and the strategies of meeting other people (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 89).

During the student exchange programme, there is inevitably a diffusion of the students' professional (or in this case, student) life and their personal life, as they create their interculture. However, at the student summer camp, where forty students from different cultures across Europe gathered in Spain, there were ten organisers, students from Spain, and thirty participants. The nature of the summer camp implies that it is in the best interest of the participants and organisers to become friendly and bond as soon as possible, because they will be spending the next two weeks together. Forty students spend the majority of the day together, during workshops, field trips and parties. There are two students in the organisation team who are the main coordinators. Unlike other organisers, they spend more time alone, planning the activities for the following day and instructing the other participants. They are extremely friendly towards the other organisers, as they are all members of the same student organisation in the same city in Spain, they share a system of meaning and a common ground, as they are a part of several aspects of each other's lives. During the activities in which all the participants are together and equals, the two coordinators also participate, talk and spend time with the others. Although they are members of the Spanish diffuse culture, in which each aspect of life and each level of personality permeates the other (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 81), they find distancing from the participants in certain situations as the only way to maintain authority and reputation. In those situations, they become more specific, culturally-speaking, as they believe there is a time and a place for reason, and a time and a place for emotions (Trompenaars and Hampden-

Turner 1997: 84), which makes them seem isolated at times. Sometimes they are more neutral towards the participants, in order to maintain authority, but sometimes they show their emotions in order to bond with them. That enables them to reconcile the characteristics of specific and diffuse cultures and keep the group harmony.

3.5 Achievement versus ascription

The fifth dimension is the final dimension deriving from the relationship to people. Trompenaars claims that "different societies confer status on individuals in different ways" (1997: 103), so this dimension concerns the acknowledgement of individual status. Achievement cultures confer status based on the person's achievements, whereas ascriptive cultures confer status based on the person's age, gender, relations or education.

One of the most difficult situations during student exchange programmes is adapting to a different education system. During the exchange semester, students leave their well-known academic environments, where they had already achieved a certain status based on their accomplishments, in order to re-build their status and reputation in a new culture and academic community. In these instances, what is assumed by all students is that their status would be conferred based on their achievements, if they are members of an achievement culture. Members of ascription cultures may not have any leverage to rely on for their status to be ascribed. However, exchange students are inevitably in a less favourable position in comparison to local students during courses. In one of such courses at the University in Austria, which a student from Serbia attended, there were several students who had attended one of the previous, very similar, courses taught by the same professor. This meant that, in addition to not sharing the common ground of being a local student and knowing the teaching methods of the said professor, the exchange student also lacked the common ground regarding the view of her former students in the eyes of this professor.

In accordance with Trompenaars' observation that Austrian culture is ascriptive and it confers status based on previous experience, the professor often referred to observations and accomplishments of students who had attended the previous course, at times holding the lack of knowledge of students who had not against them. She also relied on this as an indicator of their success during the current course. Therefore, those students had their status conferred onto them by ascription, as well as any future accomplishments and success brought about by their status. The professor and her former students established a common ground which the new students could not access, and it affected their experience of the course and it meant that the new students were also not familiar with the professor's methods. They had to build their status based on their achievements, and the inability to achieve enough could affect their academic success. In

addition, based on Trompenaars' research, Serbia could be seen as achievement-oriented, which meant that this way of conferring status was a point of frustration for the student.

On the other hand, that same student's experience regarding academic success was completely different when taking part in courses at a German university. This might correspond to German culture being a blend of both orientations, thus affecting the perception of the coursework in an entirely different manner.

3.6 Sequential versus synchronic

One of the greatest differences among members of different cultures stems from their relationship towards time. Both Trompenaars (1997) and Hall (1976) discussed this issue and developed their dichotomies of sequential versus synchronic, and monochronic versus polychronic time, respectively. What Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner discussed in their book regarding this dichotomy is the relationship towards the past, the present and the future. In some cultures, time flows in a straight line, it is a sequence of separate events, minutes, hours, days, months and years, succeeding each other, but also controlling lives, obligations and relationships with people. In others, time flows in a circle, and the time dimensions of the past, the present and the future are all connected, so that both the past and the future affect present actions. It is their opinion that the way we perceive time is intertwined with the way we plan, make strategies and coordinate events and actions. The way we perceive time affects the organisation of experiences and actions (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 121).

The culture-dependent perception of time among the students in intercultural communities caused many misunderstandings in terms of their daily activities. In the context of the summer camp in Spain, it was a daily practice of the organisers to display the schedule for the following day the evening before, so all the participants would know which activities were planned for the next day and at what time. However, the majority of participants viewed the schedule sequentially and paid attention only to the following activity and the time it took place, not perceiving the latter activities. Due to the number of activities, and the density of the schedule, the time when some of the activities took place and their duration did not suit everyone. This usually applied to the workshops and the *siesta* time, which was quite necessary, and, according to the participants, not long enough. The common ground known to all the participants of the summer camp is the fact that all the activities and workshops must be completed. Nevertheless, some of the participants still found the schedule too strenuous and ambitious. In addition, although most participants belonged to synchronic cultures, according to Trompenaars, because of the sequential representation of the schedule, in which one activity followed the other, with small periods of free time in between, the way the participants planned their days also became more sequential.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim (in Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 121) thought of time as a social construct enabling the members of a culture to coordinate their activities. In the context of these two types of cultures, that means that the time indicated on the schedule could have been seen as approximate or exact. Although the members of synchronic cultures perceived the schedule sequentially, they still perceived the time indicated as approximate, in accordance with their national culture, which meant they were often late. The members of sequential cultures thought of their tardiness as rude and inappropriate, as the common ground in this case would also be the respect of other people's time. The tardiness of several members affected the entire schedule for the day and the efficacy of the entire group. Still, the nature of the summer camp was informal and not seen as punishable, even if the participants were late for the workshops. The organisers themselves, being Spanish and belonging to a synchronic culture, tried not to deviate from the set schedule, in order to stick to the programme. They were aware that the sequential planning is fragile and prone to fall apart if anything unexpected occurs (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 136), so they deemed the tardiness and deviations from the plan acceptable, since it was necessary (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 125). The members of sequential cultures saw it as the Spaniards implementing, as they called it, "the Spanish time". But, as Hall (1959: 29) notes, the adjustment was necessary in certain cases, so no participant would be frustrated.

On the other hand, during the student exchange programme, when it came to their academic perception of time, the students abided by the set times of lectures and were rarely late, independent of their national culture. The common ground was the knowledge of the repercussions their tardiness might bring. In other cases, when in more informal settings, such as field trips or parties, the member of synchronic cultures tended to perceive the agreed time as approximate, which led to the frustration of the members of sequential cultures. The common ground in these cases was the knowledge that, even if an hour late, they would still make it to the event, as it was previously arranged. However, for the members of sequential cultures, the common ground also included the departure time, which the members of synchronic cultures did not share. In this case, as in many others, it was a question of reconciling individual interests and the interests of the group.

3.7 Internal versus external control

Trompenaars' last dimension is concerned with the relationship towards nature and the environment, as well as the role people assign to the environment, which stands in the centre of human existence. According to some cultures, nature should be controlled. The greatest influence on the lives of individuals, their virtues

and shortcomings are in themselves. All values and motivation come from within (internal control). According to other cultures, man is a part of nature and must act in accordance with its laws and forces. The world is stronger than one individual, nature should be feared or mimicked (external control). Cultures differ in their approach to the environment, in believing that an individual can affect the environment or that one must react to external circumstances (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 154). That external influence does not solely have to be a natural force, but also an influence made by knowledge, people or convictions, and the ideal is the adjustment to external factors to one's benefit (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 145).

During her student exchange period in Germany, the author of this paper encountered something uncommon for the culture she grew up in, which was recycling. Being a part of a Serbian culture, which is making its strides towards becoming greener, she was still behind on becoming a part of one of the greenest cultures in Europe. So, having moved to Germany, she had to be educated on the fine art of separating *Biomüll* from *Restmüll*, and plastic from paper, and that meant that she had to switch her entire mindset and adopt the symbols of German green culture in order to immerse herself into the lifestyle (but also not get fined). Luckily, her German roommates were there to help her. Serbia was not mentioned by Trompenaars in this context, but the author believes that Serbia is a more externally influenced culture, whereas Germany is more internal. However, she was also externally influenced in Germany. Upon her return, she wanted to transfer some of the knowledge to her native culture, which started after discovering a recycling container for plastic in her neighbourhood. Despite belonging to an external culture, according to Trompenaars, her personal characteristics overrode the characteristics of her national culture. This would suggest that she internalised these values to an extent and wished to influence her surroundings, thus successfully using external influence and acting in accordance with her convictions. As Trompenaars claims, in modern times, there is a reconciliation between these two (1997: 151). As a result, she made her household, at least, a bit greener, as she became internally guided as an individual.

4. Conclusion

> *Human beings draw close to one another by their common nature,*
> *but habits and customs keep them apart.*
> (Confucius in Samovar et al. 2010: 1)

The instances of intercultural communication in this paper show that the interlocutors tend to use familiar patterns of behaviour, based on the cultural models from their native culture, which are woven into the intercultural environment in order for

them to make sense out of it. Thus, they tend to interpret the events and react in certain situations based on where they fall within the spectrum of these dimensions. However, Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010: 41) claim that, despite the common framework of each culture, people are not "captives of their culture", nor do they have to obey all its principles. They are, rather, more willing to "turn from their identities as representative members of their cultures of origin to focus on their identities as individuals, and to their relationships as individuals to those cultures" (Aston 1993: 237), thus displaying "flexible cultural identities" (Ting-Toomey in Aston 1993: 237). This is what enables them to find common areas of like-mindedness within an intercultural community and to adapt their cultural views, especially when that is seen as imperative for the group dynamics. According to Hall (1966: 4), the relationship between man and the cultural dimension is now such that both man and his environment mutually mold each other. While creating their environment, people decide what kind of organisms they will be.

The aim of this paper was to prove that the model of cultural dimensions could be transferred onto a different context and still be applicable. In addition, the author can claim that the reconciliation between the two ends of the spectrum was only accomplished due to the creation of a temporary and unique interculture, with its own way of viewing and organising life and its own set of values and customs, created "by people interacting, and at the same time determining further interaction" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 24). It is the sum of the cultures of all its members, but also their individual personalities, and it is shared among the people who spend their lives together and "who have been exposed to similar experiences" (Samovar et al. 2010: 22). The experience within the intercultural community creates the common frame of reference to which each individual from a different culture can contribute. In the context of these communities, their common reality becomes the frame of reference for their members' worldview, meaning transfer and interpretation. Thus, this *ad hoc* interculture becomes, in a way, a high context culture, according to Hall (1976: 91), since its members have a high level of common and assumed knowledge, as well as common ground, enabling them to communicate successfully. This is in agreement with Hofstede's claim that even a group of randomly selected individuals can create their own culture, based on existing values (2010: 12). In addition, the members of these intercultures are aware of cultural differences and strive to respect them.

As was indicated in the introduction, the research was conducted through participant observation and immersion into the groups presented in this paper over the course of student exchange periods. This was a multiple case study, since not all of these dimensions could be identified in a single community. On the one hand, since the author was one of the participants in these groups, it could be said that she has reliable intuitions about the claims she makes, as she analysed these interactions in

natural settings, which were not influenced by the researcher. On the other hand, since the collected data were retrospectively analysed in the context of this paper, there might be instances where the author was not entirely objective in her interpretations, due to the fact that the perceived instances were attributed to certain principles, rather than being initially investigated as examples of the said principles. The conclusions drawn from this research are a detailed description of three coherent groups, which hopefully proves that these conclusions could be applicable in similar settings, but by no means in every single intercultural community. These instances and cultural dimensions are not a surefire way of understanding cultural models, but they can help with the interpretation of certain events and reactions in certain situations.

The more we engage in intercultural exchanges, the better we can understand the intentions and thoughts of another, develop rapport, comity, solidarity and compassion, making our beehive smaller, safer and more peaceful.

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